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ABSTRACT

Strategic planning in higher education is discussed from the perspective of institutional research. Attention is directed to: institutional mission, institutional assessment, institutional leadership, environmental assessment, market analysis, and competitive position. Strategic planning merges incrementalism, which focuses on flexibility, practicality, and political participation in organizational decision-making, with comprehensive planning, which stresses systematic data collection and analysis. Strategic planning requires top administrative leadership, involvement, and support. Similar to corporate planning, strategic planning is entrepreneurial. Strategic planning infuses an awareness of future environmental threats and market opportunities into present-day decision-making to increase organizational capacity and desire to take risks to achieve institutional goals, values, and objectives. Emphasis is placed on the role of institutional research in realizing the potential of strategic planning to help decision-makers guide their institutions through difficult times ahead. Two checklists are included that can be used to evaluate institutional climate and components of strategic planning. (Author/SW)

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Strategic Planning vs. Disjointed Incrementalism: An Institutional Research Perspective*

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Abstract

Strategic Planning vs. Disjointed Incrementalism: An Institutional Research Perspective.

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This position paper addresses strategic planning from an institutional research perspective. Although most higher education institutions have planning or institutional research offices, few claim to have a viable planning process linked to decision making. With the advent of "strategic planning," the concept of planning in higher education is being revived. This paper distinguishes strategic planning from other approaches to planning. Strategic planning merges incrementalism, which focuses on flexibility, practicality, and political participation in organizational decision making with comprehensive planning, which stresses systematic data collection and analysis. Strategic planning requires top administrative leadership, involvement, and support. Similar to corporate planning, strategic planning is entrepreneurial. Strategic planning infuses an awareness of future environmental threats and market opportunities into present-day decision making to increase organizational capacity and desire to take risks to achieve institutional goals, values, and objectives.

This paper considers, supported by a review of the literature, these components of strategic planning: 1) institutional mission, 2) institutional assessment, 3) institutional leadership, 4) environmental assessment, 5) market analysis and 6) competitive position. Two checklists are included which can be used to evaluate institutional climate and components of strategic planning. The paper concludes by stressing the role of institutional research in realizing the potential of strategic planning to help decision makers guide their institutions through the difficult times ahead.

SOUTHERN ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

This paper was presented at the 1984 Annual Conference of the Southern Association for Institutional Research held in Little Rock, Arkansas, October 24-26, 1984. It was reviewed by the SAIR Publications Committee and was judged to be of interest and pertinent to others concerned with the research in higher education. This paper has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of Conference Papers.

Richard D. Howard
President, SAIR

About a decade ago there was substantial interest in planning in higher education. In 1974, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools gave impetus to institutional research and planning by adding a section under Standard II. Many institutions launched a planning office or institutional research office or a combination office. Yet today few institutions claim to have a viable planning process linked to decision making and institutional direction. Too often these efforts to institute formal planning have culminated in a cumbersome paper exercise or a voluminous document which gathers dust on the president's office shelf. The prestige of planning officers has ebbed and many such positions or designations have disappeared from the Directory of Higher Education. It appears, however, that the whole concept of planning in higher education is being revived. Stimulating books such as George Keller's Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in American Higher Education are like a transfusion to an ailing patient.

This position paper addresses strategic planning from an institutional research perspective. It attempts to distinguish strategic planning from other approaches to planning such as comprehensive, long-range planning and incrementalism. The paper considers, supported by a review of the literature, these components of strategic planning.

1. Institutional mission: Traditions, values, and aspirations.
2. Institutional assessment: Academic and financial.
3. Institutional leadership: Flexibility vs. prescription.
4. Environmental assessment: Threats and opportunties.
5. Market analysis: Perceptions, preferences, and opportunities.
6. Competitive position: Threats and opportunities.

Many believe that higher education is going through a planning and management revolution. This paper includes two checklists to 1) determine the climate for strategic planning at higher education institutions and 2) evaluate the components of strategic planning at these institutions. The paper concludes by stressing the role of institutional research in realizing the potential of strategic planning to help decision makers guide their institutions through the difficult times ahead.

Approaches to Planning in Higher Education

A variety of definitions and interpretations of strategic planning are found in the literature. Strategic planning is understood by some as being synonymous with long-range, comprehensive planning (Steiner, 1979; Uhl, 1983); some wonder if it isn't a rehashing of ad hoc, disjointed incrementalism (Morgan, 1984). Other scholars insist that strategic planning is something new and entirely appropriate to the current climate of management in higher education (Keller, 1983; Kotler and Murphy, 1981). Still others believe that the whole idea of strategic planning has already fallen out of fashion because it cannot measure up to the exaggerated and lofty expectations it generates (Fincher, 1982; Peterson, 1984). From the perspective of institutional research, the meaning and value of strategic planning can best be understood by distinguishing its characteristics from those of comprehensive, long-range planning and incrementalism.

Comprehensive or long-range planning represents the traditional view of planners that planning occurs in a rational system. In the context of such a system, long-range planning strives to gather and analyze data in a structured and systematic way to develop objective criteria to formulate goals, evaluate

alternatives, and adopt, implement, and monitor plans. Cope (1981) suggests that long-range planning assumes a closed system, focusing internally on a final master plan which often consists of an aggregate of separate deparmental plans that often ignore institutional values, political circumstances, and environmental exigencies.

According to Keller (1983), academic management at most colleges and universities has not embraced long-range, comprehensive planning, but rather operates according to a kind of disjointed incrementalism. The term "incrementalism" was invented by Lindbloom (1959) to emphasize the limitations of the "rational-comprehensive method" of policy planning. According to Lindbloom (1959: 80) the rational-comprehensive method "assumes intellectual capacities that man simply does not possess, and is even more absurd as an approach to policy when the time and money is limited, as is always the case."

The incremental approach to planning holds that the people and organizations are not always rational. Change occurs in a political and social context where all the dynamics of decision making cannot be grasped. On this view, traditional planning, which seeks to forecast the future, determine objective long-range goals and then prescribe ways for their implementation, becomes an exercise in futility. Incrementalism requires that we recognize the socio-political realities of organizational decision making and strive for, at best, an enlightened partisanship of individuals and interest groups that builds policy through many small steps, choosing our values, goals, and means simultaneously.

The word "strategy" in military parlance implies the development of a course of action or plan to achieve a desired objective or to overcome an enemy or external threat. Overcoming the competition and maximizing profit in the

world of business and commerce are, of course, strategic objectives. The corporate literature on planning stresses the active linkage of organizational structure, resources, and values with the need to recognize and adapt to changing environmental conditions and competitive forces (Hosmer, 1982; Steiner, 1979).

From the corporate view, strategic planning is entrepreneurial. It is characterized as a systematic process of risk-taking in decision making to counter external threats and to exploit market opportunities toward the optimum benefit of the organization (Drucker, 1974). Drucker (1974: 125) defined strategic planning as:

> the continuous process of making present entrepreneurial (risk-taking) decisions systematically and with the greatest knowledge of their futurity; organizing systematically the efforts needed to carry out these decisions; and measuring the results of these decisions against the expectations through organized, systematic feedback.

The potential of the corporate concept of strategic planning to establish a middle ground between disjointed incrementalism and formalized long-range, comprehensive planning has recently been discovered by scholars of higher education management. The success of incrementalism as a means of policy planning depends on the ability of the participants to bargain and accept tradeoffs. However, as the rampant growth of colleges and unversities of the 1960's and 1970's gives way to the spectre of declining enrollments and fiscal cutbacks looming in the 1980's, it becomes increasingly difficult to achieve the tradeoffs necessary for retrenchment in higher education. A recent thesis on public school closings (Jean, 1984: 7) notes that:

> Scarcity and contraction in the public sector increases the probability of rancorous special interest group conflict, and decreases the prospects for innovation by consensus, thereby challenging the viability of our political and administrative systems.

The rational method of comprehensive, long-range planning is also inadequate for higher education management because it is too structured and cumbersome to provide timely, innovative guidance to decision making in higher education given the rapidly shifting environmental threats and opportunities and multi-layered constituencies of colleges and universities (e.g., students and alumni; faculty; local, state and national governments; community groups, professional organizations; etc.). What is therefore needed during an era of drastic change and fierce competition is a method of higher education management that takes an active role in orchestrating the future and sets institutional priorities and goals in conjuction with an acute awareness of the surrounding economic, political, social, and competitive environments. This method is "strategic planning."

Strategic planning in higher education attempts to merge the best features of comprehensive, long-range planning and incrementalism with the agressively competitive, entrepreneurial flavor of corporate planning. Similar to incrementalism, strategic planning recognizes that organizational decision making is limited by political, social, fiscal, and temporal factors. It therefore places a premium on flexibility, practicality, and participation.

Strategic planning, however, is more than disjointed incrementalism. It incorporates a rational or analytic component that, according to Steiner (1979: 13), "begins with the setting of organizational aims, defines strategies and policies to achieve them, and develops detailed plans to make sure that the strategies are implemented." Although the thrust of strategic planning is on developing a strategic attitude or way of thinking, a systematic yet flexible process of management and evaluation is nevertheless necessary to ensure its success.

Finally, strategic planning in higher education is entrepreneurial in flavor. It stresses the importance of gaining a competitive advantage by attempting to orchestrate the future for its organization, rather than merely projecting the future and then responding to it (Mingle, 1981). As Drucker (1974: 125) states, "Strategic planning does not deal with future decisions. It deals with the futurity of present decisions." As such, strategic planning attempts to infuse an awareness of future environmental threats and opportunities into present-day decision making in order to increase organizational capacity and desire to take risks to achieve institutional values, goals, and objectives.

George Keller, in his book Academic Strategies: The Management Revolution in American Higher Education (1983), outlines what he considers to be the six salient characteristics of strategic planning in higher education management. Rugg at Kennesaw College has suggested that these characteristics can serve as an institutional report card for the evaluation of the strategic planning process (see Table 1). It is useful for our purposes to examine these characteristics.

1. Strategic planning is proactive rather than reactive. Strategic planning implies a belief among decision makers that an organization or institution can to some extent mold its own destiny in a positive and assertive manner given the vicissitudes of educational demand, economic conditions, and shifting political winds.

2. Strategic planning concentrates on the external environment. Strategic planning recognizes the importance of continually monitoring the changing outside forces that directly or indirectly affect the college or university. Although strategic planning emphasizes institutional adaptability and responsiveness to the environment, it does not require the surrender of basic institutional values to external exigencies.

3. Strategic planning is competitive in nature. It recognizes that college and university programs are to some extent subject to economic, demographic, and geographical constraints. Strategic planning strives to identify and fortify an institution's competitive advantage in the vast and varied higher education marketplace.

4. Strategic planning focuses on decisions, not plans. Although it is analytic and systematic, strategic planning does not strive to produce thick, detailed annual plans. Rather, it focuses on bringing the most relevant analyses and forecasts to the attention of the key people in the institution to stimulate creative and innovative decisions.

5. Strategic planning is politically and psychologically sensitive. It recognizes that organizations are guided by political intrigue, psychological manipulation, and multi-constituent participation. Strategic planning, in addition to using rationality, facts, and objective data, builds psychological commitment and political support towards strategic goals and ideas but does not shy away from controversy.

6. Strategic planning builds upon commitment to the institution. Because it attempts to effectively overcome the short-term political conflicts of departments, programs, and individuals within the organization, strategic planning places a high priority on the long-term survival, excellence, and integrity of the institution as a common goal.

Institutions which demonstrate these characteristics are practicing effective strategic planning. The next section focuses more precisely on the components that make up the process of strategic planning for higher education.

Components of Strategic Planning

The fundamental aim of strategic planning in higher education is to match the internal capacities and values of an institution with external constraints and opportunities that affect the institution. Implicit in this aim is a model or conceptual framework for the strategic planning process (Keller, 1983; Kotler and Murphy, 1981; Uhl, 1983). Underlying the model are two major components: an internal component, which focuses on institutional strengths, weaknesses, and values, and an external component, which concerns environmental threats and market opportunties. The internal component of strategic planning includes institutional mission, assessment, and leadership. The external component can be broken down into environmental assessment, market analysis, and competitive position (see Figure 1).

Table 1

Institutional Report Card on the Characteristics of Strategic Planning

Rating			
Low	Average	High	Characteristic
_____	_____	_____	1. Strategic planning is proactive rather than reactive.
_____	_____	_____	2. Strategic planning concentrates on the external environment.
_____	_____	_____	3. Strategic planning is competitive in nature.
_____	_____	_____	4. Strategic planning focuses on decisions, not plans.
_____	_____	_____	5. Strategic planning is politically and psychologically sensitive.
_____	_____	_____	6. Strategic planning builds upon commitment to the institution.

(Adapted from George Keller (1983), Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in American Higher Education, as suggested by Edwin A. Rugg, Executive Assistant to the President, Kennesaw College.)

Internal Components

1. Institutional mission: Traditions, values, and aspirations.

Underlying every college, university, and school is a set of personal values, traditions, and dreams for the future that constitute its institutional mission. The institutional mission can vary among colleges and universities. For example, although several public universities in a state can share the common goal of providing quality education to fill the vocational and professional needs of the citizens at a reasonable cost, each can serve a slightly different type of clientele ranging from working adults returning to school part-time or at night to full-time traditional students just out of high school who live on campus.

Perhaps the most important contribution of strategy in higher education is its potential to help bring to fruition institutional values, goals, and dreams. Often, however, there may exist different opinions between the various constituencies of students, faculty, administrators, alumni and trustees about the nature of the central mission and future direction of an institution. However, effective strategic planning, because it actively strives to link analysis to decision making, requires that ideas about insitutional values and goals be identified, understood, and disseminated, regardless of whether or not they involve conflict or controversy.

Once the institutional mission is fully understood, it can then be examined to determine its desirability and viability in view of current and projected environmental constraints and opportunities. According to a recent NCHEMS Newsletter, (1984: 11) "research has shown that resilient colleges understand the basic premise on which the integrity of their institution rests, and make their decisions accordingly." An important value of strategic planning in higher education, therefore, l[illegible] in its ability to manifest institutional values and

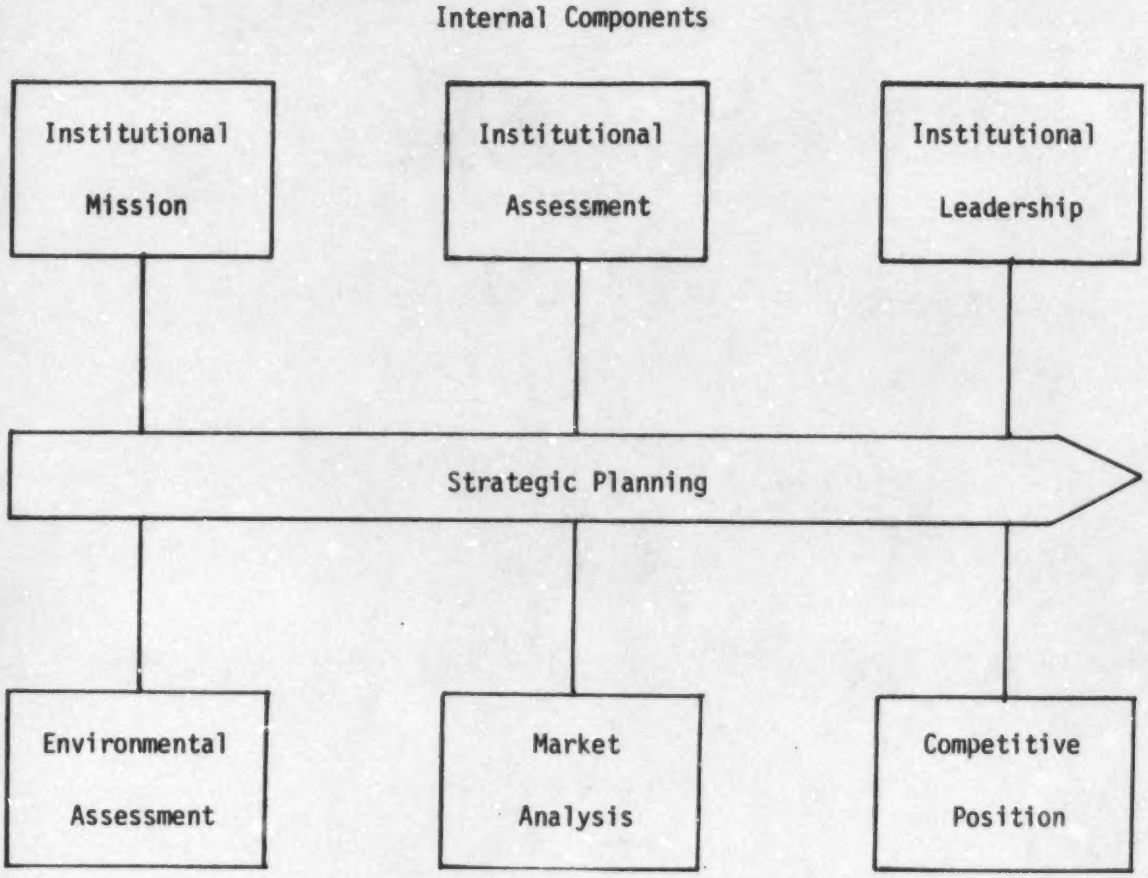

FIGURE 1. Components of Strategic Planning in Higher Education. (Adapted from George Keller (1983). Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in American Higher Education, p. 152).

goals that can be strengthened yet marginally adjusted to conform to changing external circumstances.

2. Institutional assessment: Academic and financial. A second element of internal analysis in strategic planning is the assessment of institutional academic and financial strengths and weaknesses. Strategic planning in businesses and corporations emphasizes first and foremost the need for honest and critical self-evaluation (So, 1984). Because higher education has until recently experienced rapid growth in clientele and bountiful financial and political support, there has been little need for institutional introspection. Reluctance among colleges and universities to engage in self-evaluation exists also because there is a tendency among faculty and administration not to get involved in the unpleasant task of organizational management. According to Keller (1983: 143) there exists in the realm of higher education:

> the dogma that institutions of higher learning do better if they go unmanaged, muddle through incrementally, and remain superciliously aloof but verbally persistent about public and private support for their learned labors.

An honest and self-critical institutional assessment is a fundamental component of effective strategic planning. An institution should evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of its faculty, academic programs, facilities, ambience, tuition levels, scholarship aid, students, alumni support levels, and organizational structure. Techniques for institutional assessment range from simple matrices which match program quality to demands, needs, and costs, to more complex series of evaluative criteria and corresponding categories for rating each criteria. Whatever technique is selected for institutional assessment, to achieve successful strategic planning, an honest and critical institutional introspection is a necessary component.

3. Institutional leadership: Flexibility vs. prescription. The final element of the internal analysis component of strategic planning is the need for an awareness of the characteristics and priorities of the key leaders of a college or university who will be making strategic decisions: the president, provost, vice-presidents, deans, and leading faculty members. Effective strategic planning requires that there exist amongst institutional leadership sufficient interest and belief in the importance of planning. Mims (1979) suggests several basic conditions which must be present before a planning system can be undertaken. The conditions include the need for top administrative support and involvement, the belief that something needs to be done, the stability of leadership, and the absence of an immediate crisis (see Table 2). Only when these conditions are met can there exist the proper climate for strategic planning.

Often, resistance upon the part of top academic leaders to planning is a result of misunderstandings among both the planning staff and senior administrators about their respective roles. These roles can be better understood in relation to perceived needs for flexibility versus prescription. Takeuchi (1984) suggests that administrators are low on prescription and high on flexibility. Administrators in higher education are called on to resolve conflicts and issues amongst a backdrop of multi-layered constituencies such as governing boards, academic departments, community groups, political representatives, and faculty, staff, and students. Optimal decision making under the constraints of time, money, and constituent participation requires a certain margin of flexibility. Staff planners or institution researchers, however, are high on prescription and low on flexibility. Staff planners provide systematic information relevant to decision making and, as such, feel the need to see some evidence that their reports are used and their recommendations implemented. When both

Table 2

Checklist for Determining Institutional Climate for Strategic Planning

Yes	No	
_____	_____	Some agreement that problems do exist and some agreement on the nature and extent of problems
_____	_____	Widely felt need to "do something"
_____	_____	Top administrative support and involvement
_____	_____	Opportunities to plan
_____	_____	Capacity to plan - skills and resources
_____	_____	Some stability of leadership
_____	_____	Absence of immediate crisis
_____	_____	Trust (within the institution)

(Adapted from Mims, R.S. Facilitating Pervasive Planning: Multi-Level Institutional Planning, ERIC Reports (ED 174 127), 1979, p. 3.)

roles are mutually understood by administrators and researchers/planners, the compromises necessary to make strategic decisions can be more easily achieved.

External Components

1. Environmental assessment: Threats and opportunities. According to Keller, strategic planning's single most important contribution to organizational decision making is that it "looks outward and is focused on keeping the institution in step with the changing environment" (1983: 145). Most change at higher education institutions is stimulated by external factors such as the state of the economy, birth and mirgration patterns, fluctuating fuel costs, new educational technologies, new federal laws, and shifts in job markets.

An environmental assessment, as a component of strategic planning, strives to discover new service opportunities as well as uncover existing and future threats to institutional health and vitality. Environmental analysis involves studies and forecasts in the areas of technology, economics, demographics, the political and legal system, and social and cultural factors. Various methods can be employed in the analyses, such as the delphi technique, which relies upon successive rounds of consensus expert opinion, and trend analysis, which monitors journals, newspapers, government statistics and reports, and scholarly books to scan and identify environmental trends. A college and university can utilize its greatest resource - its faculty - to select the most appropriate methodologies and subjects for the environmental analysis.

2. Market analysis: Perceptions, preferences, and opportunities. With the declining pool of traditional college age students projected to continue into the 1990's, higher education must enter an era of student consumerism.

Through market analysis, colleges and universities can more closely monitor the changing market for traditional students and discover potential new markets such as adult education and continuing education for business and corporations.

The market analysis component of strategic planning can best be understood in terms of perceptions, preferences, and opportunities. The first step is to determine a college or university's current and potential market through the use of such techniques as segmentation and perceptual mapping. Segmentation attempts to identify the different types of clients or potential clients in the market. Perceptual mapping attempts to learn how the various market segments perceive the mission, direction, strengths and weaknesses of the institution. The perceptions of the institution of individuals and groups that can influence student matriculation decisions or provide financial support should be also identified (e.g., parents, alumni, business leaders, community groups, etc.).

Once a college or university understands and accepts its special niche in the higher education marketplace, it can either seek new market opportunities, or maintain or reduce its current market and size according to its mission and goals. Institutions that want to expand and vary their markets can employ a "product/market opportunity strategy" (Kotler and Murphy, 1981).

Table 3 shows how a product/market opportunity matrix can be used to increase penetration of the existing market, expand the market geographically, or seek new markets. Accompanying the expansion or diversification of the market is product innovation or modification. For example, expansion of the existing market might involve adding short courses, adapting evening and weekend programs or altering the educational delivery system by using new technologies, such as home computers or television.

TABLE J

Product/Market Opportunity Strategy

Markets	Products: Existing	Products: Modified	Products: New
Existing	1. Market Penetration	4. Product Modification —short courses —evening program —weekend program —new delivery system	7. Production Innovation —new courses —new departments —new schools
Geographical	2. Geographical Expansion —new areas of city —new cities —foreign	5. Modification for Dispersed Markets —programs offered on military bases or at U.S. firms based abroad	8. Geographic Innovation
New	3. New Markets A. Individual —senior citizens —homemakers —ethnic minorities B. Institutional —business firms —social agencies	6. Modification for New Markets A. Individual —senior citizens B. Institutional —business —government	10. Total Innovation —new courses —new departments —new schools

(Source: Kotler and Murphy, "Strategic Planning," The Journal of Higher Education, 52 (5), p. 484.)

3. Competitive position: Threats and opportunities. The final element of the external analysis component of strategic planning concerns competition from other colleges and universities. As the market for higher education continues to undergo rapid changes and shifts, it becomes increasingly important for a college or university to gain an awareness of its competitive advantage relative to other institutions. What strengths and advantages does your institution have over other institutions competing for your market? Do you have advantages of location, tradition, cost, programs, size, ambience, or other factors?

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A successful strategic plan must include a knowledge of where an institution stands relative to its competition, and an idea of what kind of competitive position it wants to establish. Systems for collecting information on colleges and universities should be adopted to facilitate competitor evaluation. In a strategic planning study for the University of Maryland, Keller (1983) devised a way to roughly estimate an institution's comparative situation relative to competing institutions based on the criteria of quality of life and academic quality (see Figure 2). Other techniques such as cluster analysis can be used to give a more precise picture of an institution's competitive situation. Once an institution's competitive situation has been established, it can gear its marketing and public relations efforts to highlight its unique programs and characteristics.

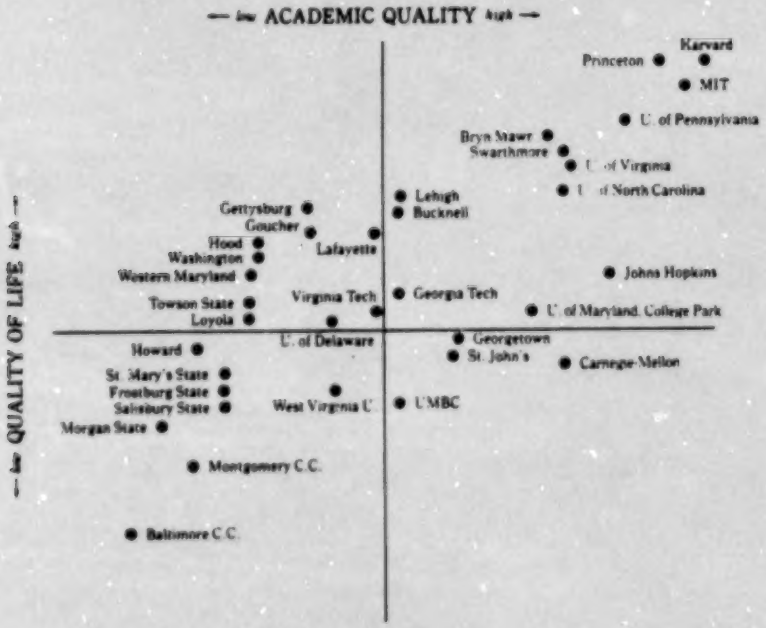

Figure 2. Competitive Situation Plot
for the University of Maryland

(Source: George Keller (1983), Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in American Higher Education, p. 161.)

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Strategic Planning and the Role of Institutional Research

The concept of strategic planning has great potential for improving higher education management. Strategic planning offers the analytic and systematic support found in comprehensive, long-range planning without placing undue emphasis on the formality of the process and the production of a cumbersome final document. Fundamental to strategic planning is its entrepreneurial flavor. Strategic planning is an attitude or way of thinking. Its focus is on aiding decision makers to actively orchestrate their organization's future by matching institutional values, goals, strengths, and weaknesses with an awareness of current and projected environmental constraints and market opportunities.

Because strategic planning is a rational, goal-oriented process, it is more than ad hoc, disjointed incrementalism. Strategic planning moves beyond incrementalism precisely because it urges institutions to forge their own destinies through critical self-evaluation and systematic analyses of environmental and market factors. Strategic planning, however, retains from incrementalism the recognition of the political and psychological realities of organizational behavior. It is vital to successful management in higher education to build strategies and plans based on constituent participation and consensus. Strategic planning does not eschew political and organizational controversy, but fashions it into strong interest and commitment to institutional goals, values, and directions.

Given the powerful economic and demographic changes affecting today's colleges and universities, the role of the staff planner or researcher takes on added significance. With constantly improving analytical and forecasting techniques at his or her disposal, the institutional researcher can provide information, impetus, and support for establishing a climate for strategic planning.

Given the emphasis that strategic planning places on the link between analysis and decision making, the role of the institutional researcher becomes to some extent political. Only through assertive yet low profile participation in the daily political struggles at their colleges or universities can institutional researchers effectively support the strategic decisions that guide the future directions of their institutions.

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